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ABSTRACT

This article describes an attempt by a group of Harvard and M.I.T. graduate students to use organization development methods for the first time in a large urban school system. The group concluded that (1) organization development consultants must be aware of the different environment within which large city school systems operate, (2) such an environment permits the school system to become power entrenched, (3) the struggle for power becomes the key organizational phenomenon, (4) the consultant must choose a method other than collaboration with the power conservative organizational leadership, (5) the change potential of both lower-level participants in the school system and groups outside the system could be harnessed so that environmental forces become more turbulent and less easily controlled by the top of the organization, (6) structural changes must accompany such a method, and (7) work is needed on the entry contract negotiation phase of organization development as used in urban school systems. (Author/LLR)

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THE UTILITY OF ORGANIZATION DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES IN BIG CITY SCHOOL SYSTEMS

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EA 003 294

THE UTILITY OF ORGANIZATION DEVELOPMENT
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Organization Development

Organization development, called OD, is an attempt to synthesize the planned organizational change methods of the past. Much of what has emerged as OD depends on two historical antecedents: the open-systems approach to understanding organizations and the approach used by the T-Group-Consultant school for changing organizational processes via the usage of small group methods.

While organization development is still too new to be well-defined, it has nevertheless reached a certain level of maturity which portends its continued development as a field of study. The field is that of organizational change. OD is the rubric given to the latest method for changing organizations. By way of definition, most OD specialist would generally agree with Richard Beckhard's definition of organization development. He says,

> Organization development is an effort (1) planned, (2) organization-wide, and (3) managed from the top, to (4) increase organization effectiveness and health through (5) planned interventions in the organization's "processes," using behavioral-science knowledge.[1]

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[1]Richard Beckhard, Organization Development: Strategies and Models (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1969), p.9.

There is a school of thought which defines OD more broadly and maintains that any interventions - structural, political, legal or procedural - which help to change an organization in a desired direction are legitimate organization development methods.

The essential components of the OD method are: (1) the scope: it is an organization-wide effort to change the system; (2) the method of working: premised on the assumption that those who really know the system best and have a reason for wanting to change it are the members of the organization, OD specialists attempt to transfer their skills and knowledge to their clients through collaboration so that the clients can independently be responsible for their own organizational change; (3) the need for legitimacy: OD recognizes organizational authority as a force which could destroy any effort to change an organization and therefore, OD specialists insist on the approval and active collaboration with those at the top of the organizational hierarchy; (4) the definition of an organization: any system made up of three or more persons with a purpose (it is assumed that most OD will be done in complex organizations comprised of many persons and multiple goals) which can act independently enough to make its own decisions about whether, where and how it will change; (5) the targets of change: any aspects of the system (persons, structure, general culture, attitudes, methods of working together) which need to be changed in order for the organization to meet its effectiveness criteria as defined by the client; and (6) the client: the person

or persons in the organization who have the problem.

The organization development method usually involves the following kinds of activities: getting together an OD team composed of the right combination of expertise; entering the organization and negotiating the contract with the client in such a way that there is maximum opportunity to use the OD method; dealing with the client's perceptions of the problem as opposed to the "real" problem (they may or may not be the same); collecting data in such a way that one gets the information he needs and also helps prepare the respondent for the way in which the data will be used; diagnosing the organizational problems; feeding back the data and diagnosis to the client for joint action-planning; deciding with the client on an intervention or change strategy; implementing the change design; evaluating the intervention; continuing to implement and sustain interventions based on evaluation data until the system is performing as desired.

The OD specialist, therefore, must be especially skilled in "process"[2] methods of planned organizational change as many of his interventions will involve the use of the laboratory method to help change attitudes and work methods. On the other hand, most OD specialists will also have knowledge and skills in the areas of data collection and evaluation research methods, system diagnosis, organizational design and organizational theory.

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[2]"Process" here refers to how the task is accomplished or how people work together. It is different from "content," which refers to the task itself. Process interventions rely heavily on experiential and group educational methods for changing attitudes, methods of working or a whole organizational culture.

The Utility of Organization Development in a Big City School System: A Case Study

The OD method has to date been used mainly in industrial settings. It is also in use in community development efforts and has been used to implement organizational changes in some suburban school systems. It has been more difficult, however, to get the permission for and commitment from those in authority to use the OD method in large urban school systems.

During the 1968-69 school year, a team of six advanced doctoral students taking a practicum course in the organizational development method at the Sloan School of Management, M.I.T., undertook to use the OD method in a big city school system. The team was asked to consider the problems of fourteen departments known as Special Services and to suggest ways to reorganize them so as to make them more effective. The M.I.T. team, as the group was called, attempted to do this by using the OD method.

Entry, the process of getting access to the organization in such a way that the potential for collaboration change is maximized, was very difficult in this case. The school system was defensive about outsiders coming in at all, as was evidenced by a two month deliberation and delay before the exploratory meeting took place between the two parties. Also, those at the top of the school organization, at the Associate Superintendent level, were quite suspect of the team's ideas about collaboration. They just wanted the report. The M.I.T. team, on the other hand, was anxious to get into the school system and begin collecting data after such a long delay,

and they were unwilling to risk the learning experience by insisting on the work method at entry. The team felt it would be possible to implement the collaborative method simply by doing it as part of the process during the study. For all of these reasons, data collection began without the M.I.T. team members being convinced that the city school system authorities understood the OD work method which would later be used.

The data collection phase comprised thirty to ninety minute interviews with a cross-section diagonal slice of Special Services personnel and with those outside Special Services who had some knowledge about it. Twenty-four people were interviewed in all. Respondents were asked open-ended questions about their perception of the positive and negative features of the Special Services area as it was consituted and they were asked to make suggestions for possible changes. Respondents were also told how the data would be used and were assured that no names would be identified with statements made.

A diagnosis of the data collected revealed four common areas which were perceived as problems by the respondents and which seemed to hinder the work process: coordination, communication and information flow, adaptive capacity and authority/power issues.

It was discovered that the area known as Special Services was very differentiated and was both geographically disperse (i.e. housed in different buildings throughout the city) and organizationally disperse (i.e. under the direction of three Associate Superintendents and one Assistant Superintendent). As one Associate Superintendent put it, "Special Services is an area that has just added on and on."

While differentiation is an encouraging bureaucratic phenomenon because it shows a willingness to meet the diverse needs of the environment, no accompanying integrating force was present to help coordinate such diversity. Thus, Special Services was found to be uncoordinated.

It was discovered that there was little vertical communication between superiors and subordinates and that official horizontal communication (from peer to peer across departmental lines) was almost non-existent. Communication was mainly "folkway" in nature, taking place informally and socially in non-work or pseudo-work settings.

The information exchanged, it was revealed, was of generally poor quality. Subordinates told superiors what they wanted to hear so as to gain their favor. Peers perceived information as power and tended to distort it and use it resourcefully in politically relevant ways. The quantity of information exchanged was also found wanting. Information was frequently hoarded as a future power resource and that which was exchanged was done in an inefficient manner and took a great deal of time to get from sender to receiver.

The data collected substantiated that the Special Services area was generally non-adaptive to its environment. While it is true that departments were added to handle new demands, these new departments were usually initiated in response to offers for financial and programmatic assistance made by the State of Massachusetts. Within departments already established, little was done to meet the

needs of a changing environment. In general, the norm perceived by members of Special Services is that it is generally risky to be too innovative and adaptive. A person interested in advancement within the school system does not "make waves." Planned organizational change happens periodically - especially in response to crisis - not on a continuing basis. On the other hand, the fact that the M.I.T. study was initiated by the system is evidence that it does change and that it does make some attempt to adapt.

Finally, the data revealed the prevalence of rather dysfunctional power struggles. Information exchange as power has already been cited as one example. Instances were also discovered of both non-compliance to directives coming from very high administrative levels, and limited compliance to such directives in politically relevant ways. A pronounced status and pay differentiation between the various department heads added to the struggle. As with communication, it was discovered that power was a function or patronage and who one knew informally and socially - even to whom one had kinship ties.

Following the organizational diagnosis, data feedback meetings were held with all department heads and other representatives to (1) confirm the above diagnosis and (2) try to obtain some group consensus about alternatives for improving the system. The use of the laboratory method or group dynamics enabled the M.I.T. team to maximize participation and information exchange from those who attended the workshop (see the appendix for the workshop design). The diagnosis was confirmed. In addition, it became obvious from

observing the group that the sharing of information was a major issue (with whom and how much), that the norms of the system made it very difficult to disagree, that reverting to "professional standards" was a way to escape from and detour confrontive issues, and that official communication prior to the sessions themselves had been almost non-existent, as some participants met others for the first time at the data feedback sessions.

Following the data feedback sessions, participants were generally enthusiastic about the method of working together. A number of them interviewed at that time stated that the sessions represented one of the few times they can remember when they had an opportunity to influence decisions made above. Also, they enjoyed participating in the meetings rather than just listening to directives from above. Several participants mentioned that they were surprised at the accuracy of the M.I.T.'s data.

The M.I.T. team had originally refused to present a final report to those at the top of the organization unless they agreed to work collaboratively with the team on a blueprint for change. However, communication and collaboration with the top were less than satisfactory throughout the project. Attempts to collaborate were rejected by the top school administrators as too time-consuming and unnecessary ("just tell us what we should do"). The team finally agreed to write a report which would signal the problems, would incorporate the feelings and ideas of the workshop participants, and would be general enough that those in authority would still have to decide what to do, hopefully in collaboration with

the M.I.T. team.

This report was prepared and presented to the Superintendent of Schools and the four interested Associate Superintendents. The M.I.T. team at that time requested that copies of the report be sent to the workshop participants and all concerned meet to discuss some action-planning phases based on the data. This request was not granted. The M.I.T. team then met with three Associate Superintendents, explained the report to them, fed back additional data and offered to help them plan further action steps. This offer was not accepted.

In May, 1969, a meeting was called wherein the Deputy Superintendent presented an organizational chart which departed from the real message of the M.I.T. report. The team generally felt that their work was both distorted and ignored.

In February, 1970, the participants in the original workshop feedback sessions were again interviewed. It was discovered that (1) most of them had never seen the M.I.T. report (while they were told they could read the report at the Deputy Superintendent's office, they were not encouraged to do so) and were unaware of its contents; (2) they felt that their activity at the feedback sessions was a useless exercise and they really exerted no influence on the reorganization decisions; and (3) the same organizational problems which existed the year before were not rectified or even modified by the work of the M.I.T. team.

Analysis of the Case Study

The attempts to use organizational development methods in one large urban school system seemingly failed. The OD method for effecting organizational change was never understood. No attempt was made to deal with the organizational problems identified by the M.I.T. team. A prior commitment to confidentiality by the team at the request of top school administrators restricted the team's ability to openly share the information with lower-level participants and to encourage their active support.

On the other hand, the M.I.T. effort may be considered a limited success in that it presented those at the top of the school organization with an alternative method of working with outside consultants and effecting organizational changes. It was later discovered that the top leadership was generally favorable to the work done by the M.I.T. team. They later proved receptive to a larger system-wide study during the 1969-70 school year which is using some OD methods (e.g. workshops using the laboratory method) because they associated some of the methods as similar to those used by the M.I.T. team. Middle-level management - the workshop participants - also learned a new way of working together and seemingly approve of it. This makes them more receptive to OD in the future.

Perhaps the seeming failure of the M.I.T. team's work is due to a number of things which are important to the success or failure of other OD specialist working in big city school systems. First of all, one might question whether or not this was an OD effort given the criteria cited earlier. It was an organization-wide effort in that

the O.D. team did have access to all of the parties who could make decisions about Special Services. The team had definite change targets. The clients were defined. Those in authority legitimized the team's work by writing supporting introductory memos and voicing support. The one major criteria which was not met was the agreement on and understanding of the collaborative method for working together. Thus, the problems which should have been resolved during the entry-contract negotiation phase persisted and continued to plague the M.I.T. team throughout the project.

Another reason for failure is the short time commitment on the part of both parties. The help of the M.I.T. team was clearly needed for implementation and future collaboration. To have defined the time horizon of the project as two semesters put time pressure on both parties and led to the submitting of a report in lieu of working the problems through together. The team should have insisted that time be alloted by busy administrators and workshop participants for collaboration. The team should have invested more of its own time and energy "educating" those in authority about the OD method.

The "hidden agendas" of the two parties were never really disclosed. In a sense, the M.I.T. team wanted to practice using OD in the school system and teach the clients OD methods. It was later discovered that those at the top of the school organization wanted an outside report which could be used to support their request for more staffing, especially for an administrative assistant or coordinator for Special Services. Lack of open disclosure about

the needs of the two groups resulted in a client-consultant power struggle where each side spent a good deal of time trying to second-guess the motives and next moves of the other side.

The student status and youthful appearance of the M.I.T. team was another reason for failure. School systems tend to be very status conscious. Also, the average age for a top level administrator in this city school system is fifty-five. The team was frequently referred to as "kiddos" or "young people." Team members were regarded as students using the system to practice on and learn (and that assessment was correct because of the course nature of this project).

Conclusions

Based on the experience of the M.I.T. team plus other OD activities currently being carried out in the same school system, the author has arrived at the following conclusion about the utility of organization development strategies for big city school systems. These conclusions are still very tentative due to limited experience and the absence of harder, more quantifiable data. The conclusions are:

1. One of the aspects of using the OD method successfully in big city school systems in the future will depend on how the entry-contract negotiation phase is handled. The key, it seems to me, is to find a way whereby school administrators can be introduced to the collaborative method without being lead to believe that using the method means they can control the project so that nothing changes and the consultant is used to substantiate or increase the client's own power position.
2. OD, to be useful, must take into account the nature of the environment in which an urban school system operates and the way which that environment affects the organizational potential of the system. The research of Laurence and Lorsch substantiates the fact that different industries operate in environments with different demands placed upon them. Organizational effectiveness, they maintain, depends on the way the industry adapts to the demands of its own parti-

cular environment.[3]

Public schools exist in environments quite different from industrial settings. Urban school systems also operate in settings very different from the suburban schools. Both school systems - the urban and the suburban - are different from industry in that there is no profit/loss statement or other mechanism for continuing self-evaluation. Suburban school systems in any one metropolitan area are different from the central city system in that they compete amongst themselves for reputation. The suburban community is proud to have the "best" system of education in the area. Good schools also attract families who can afford and are willing to pay higher taxes. All of this breeds suburban school competition which is less pronounced than that found in industrial settings but certainly greater and more environmentally dependent than any similar force to be found in a big city school system.

The black community is trying to become more involved in the education of their children, but in general, the majority of parents in the city do not actively try to participate in educational decisions for a number of reasons, not the least of which is the city school bureaucracy which has made it so difficult for parents to be influential. The urban school child and his parents have neither the power of the industrial customer nor that of their suburban counterparts in influencing the schools.

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[3]Paul R. Lawrence and Jay W. Lorsch, Organization and Environment: Managing Differentiation and Integration (Cambridge: The Harvard Business School Division of Research, 1967), pp. 15-16, 108.

As a result of all this, the large urban school system tends to be insulated from the demands of its environment. Its existence is guaranteed by law. The majority of its clients, while increasingly dissatisfied, allow the school system to deal with their demands by responding to crises at the school board or top of the hierarchy level.

3. Organizational futurologists, such as Warren Bennis, maintain that we have now entered a post-bureaucratic period because (1) the organizational environments are becoming increasingly turbulent and changing with the knowledge boom, (2) the work force is much younger, better educated and more demanding of relevant changes, and (3) management philosophy has changed as a result of our increased understanding of what motivates man and how he works best. In order to cope with all this, post-bureaucratic organizations must be problem-centered, be continually adapting to rapid changes, be composed of interdisciplinary teams and be organized to deal quickly with temporary or finite tasks.[4]

It is interesting to note that most big city school systems have not yet entered the post-bureaucratic age. They continue to follow the Weberian model of organization. Perhaps this is due to the lack of environmental pressure our changing society is able to exert on these school systems, for the Weberian model has been deemed inappropriate in organi-

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[4]Warren G. Bennis, Changin Organizations (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966), pp. 1-33.

zations which respond to their changing environments.

Michel Crozier[5] has pointed out that one of the features of Weberian bureaucracy is that it permits a bureaucrat at any level to enjoy numerous degrees of freedom within the broad rule-bound framework in which he operates. Rules are never so tight that a subordinate cannot have some leeway or discretion of action in those areas where the task is uncertain, The real power in an organization, says Crozier, comes from the bureaucrat's ability to manipulate and control this uncertainty or to use information to his advantage. This view corresponds with what the M.I.T. team found in the Special Services departments.

At any rate, in those organizations where the absence of real environmental demands permits them to still follow the Weberian bureaucratic model, the organization is power entrenched and the major self-interest of organizational members has to do with enhancing their position in the power struggles. While all organizations have power struggles, those which exist in dynamic environments cannot afford to let these struggles interfere with their competition to survive. In a big city school system, on the other hand, the environmental situation is such that organizational members can spend inordinate amounts of time fully engaged in power struggles - even at the risk of organizational dysfunction.

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[5]Michel Crozier, The Bureaucratic Phenomenon (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964), pp. 160-161.

The OD method, premised on voluntary collaboration with those who hold power for organizational improvement, must be modified. Michels has pointed out that power is conservative or those who hold power seek to maintain and increase what they have, not surrender any of their power.[6] Top level school administrators may lose some of their power through decentralization by using OD methods. Therefore, it is unrealistic to expect them to use OD just for the sake of improving their systems. Why should they risk upsetting their own balance of power?

4. In connection with the above, a way must be found in a big city school system to force the power holders to see organizational change for improvement as being in their own self-interest. One way to do this is to harness the desires for change on the part of lower-level organizational participants (e.g. young teachers) and the school system's clients (e.g. parents, kids, community groups). These parties should be taught how to use OD methods - perhaps in conjunction with power change tactics - to push for changes from the bottom up and from outside the school system. This is one way to make those at the top feel some system pain or some need to change. As Beckhard states,

> "an essential condition of any effective change program is that somebody in a stra-

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[6]Robert Michels, A Sociological Study of the Oligarchial Tendencies of Modern Democracy (London: Jarrold and Sons, 1915), pp. 220, 382.

> tegic position really feels the need for change. In other words, someone or something is 'hurting.' "[7]

Rather than just cause some temporary crisis (e.g. a school boycott), those lower-level participants and system clients need to cause the system some chronic pain which causes those in authority to seriously consider relief and even health. In other words, the city school system, a public organization, needs to be put in touch with its environment which it claims to serve.

5. It is also important that OD specialists consider structural designs for urban school systems which can support the more process-oriented organizational changes. Namely, how does one redesign the school organization such that clients have greater access to it, such that environmental forces count for something. This may require serious reconsideration of the function of the school board. At present, skillful administrators know how to use lay boards to handle their crisis situations with the environment. They do this by simply elevating issues to the political level where board members are only too happy to become involved. As a result, however, the school bureaucracy often churns on quite unaffected by the environmental demands.

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[7]Beckhard, op. cit., p.16.

APPENDIX

Friday

1. We met briefly as a larger group of sixteen and four consultants (us).

2. We divided into two smaller groups of eight plus two consultants and held meetings in two separate places. In the small groups,

   a) the consultants were introduced and there was time for relationship building while name tags were issued.
   b) one of the consultants lead the discussion and fed back data while the other consultant processed the discussion.
   c) four items of data were fed back and discussed
      1) the departments are unsure about whether or not other departments both inside and outside of Special Services know what they do.
      2) there appears to be too little vertical and horizontal communication. What inter-departmental communciation there is is done informally and in different degrees. Communication is more folkway (social) than formal.
      3) there appears to be a problem with trading information between departments. Some departments seem to hoard information and some, while willing to give it, have logistics problems.
      4) the Principal seems to have a key role in how Special Services programs really work in his building. His role is often confused and sometimes he refuses to work with the SS people.
   d) the groups were asked to select three people whose purpose it was to summarize for the whole group what went on in the small group. This part of the design was to integrate smaller groups (which, it was felt, were needed to "unfreeze") back into the larger group.

3. The six chosen representatives from the two small groups, together with two consultants, took part in a fish bowl and talked about what had happened in the small groups. It was apparent that one group had refused to recognize that any of the problems really existed and the other group had seen the fedback data as being essentially correct. The central question arose: why did our groups react so differently.

4. One consultant then offered a process analysis of what he saw going on in the working group of reporters and summarizes.

5. A decision was made by the whole group to hold a meeting on Monday.

Monday

1. The whole group began working as a group by having a consultant list on the board what various people in the group volunteered as being the "real" problems in Special Services.

2. These problems were followed by an open discussion of possible solutions.

3. The consultants processed the meeting and helped bring out some of the basic differences between participants.

4. The whole group then agreed on recommendations for a different form of organization for Special Services. They agreed that there should be more opportunities to relate as they had done during the workshop.

5. It was agreed that the consultants should draft a report which incorporated the thinking of the workshop participants and that this report would then be read and discussed by the participants at a future meeting. The Associate Superintendents in charge never granted a future meeting or the permission for the participants to react to the report.

6. Some uneasiness was sensed on the part of the participants because some unfreezing had taken place but there was no assurance that those at the top of the organization would support a means by which affective feelings could be worked through.